Volunteers keep Harvest Classic hockey thriving

Andrew Hawlitzky
The Lake Report



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Jack Friesen, #4, throws his arms in celebration after teammate Ike Good, #71, scores the go-ahead goal, lifting the U13 NOTL Wolves to a 2-1 victory over Ayr. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Before the first puck drops at the Meridian Credit Union Arena, months of quiet work make the Harvest Classic possible for young players and their families.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Wolves' annual Harvest Classic Rep Tournament brought 40 teams from across Ontario last weekend, making it one of the region's biggest youth hockey tournaments of the year.

But behind every game were volunteers who spent months planning to bring the sport the community loves to life.

Tournament organizer and coach James Cadeau starts preparations in May. He books ice time, co-ordinates with hotels and secures approval from the Ontario Minor Hockey Association.

By autumn, hundreds of emails arrive from teams eager to join one of the region's biggest B-centre tournaments.

"It's a lot of fun watching the little kids. That's special, seeing eight-year-olds getting all excited before other priorities in life take over," said Cadeau.

Running the event depends on dozens of volunteers filling every role, mostly without compensation, from referees to concession staff.

Despite the struggle, Cadeau said it is important to deliver a well-run tournament so visiting teams leave with a positive impression of Niagara-on-the-Lake and local players feel proud to represent their community.

"People like coming to this area because there's a lot to do and a lot of hotels," he said. "We get a lot of demand for the tournament, but we have to deliver a good product. Otherwise, they won't come back."

Volunteer co-ordinator Tracey Hope manages sign-ups and social media for the Wolves. She said all shifts for the weekend were filled within two days after she sent out the link to parents.

"There's nothing better than playing with your neighbours and classmates and making memories in your own community," said Hope. "That's something you carry with you as you get older."

Proceeds from the barbecue and other sales cover pay for timekeepers, many of them former Wolves players who return each year to stay involved in the sport, and help close the gap between registration fees and the true cost of putting on community hockey tournaments.

Outside the arena, long-time NOTL Hockey Association board member and former Wolves player, Mike Cwiertniewski, tended the grill, serving burgers to visitors from Windsor to Ottawa.

"I played here growing up, and now I'm helping out and giving back to what gave me so much," said Cwiertniewski.

Funds raised through the tournament, including proceeds from the barbecue and team booths, go toward covering the officiating and timekeeping costs, supporting youth development programs and keeping registration fees affordable for local families.

Parents like Marie and Dan Good, whose son plays for the U13 team, staffed a table, selling apples outside the MCU Arena to raise funds supporting the NOTL Wolves' development costs.

"It's great for the kids to learn how to play together as a team," said Marie Good. "There are families from all over Ontario here, and it's cool to see everyone come together."

For volunteers, the reward is not in medals or standings but in seeing the rink full and the community connected. As Cadeau put it, they do it "for the love of the sport."

U13 rep coach Gary Friesen, a NOTL hockey grad who had a long career in the OHL, said, "The weekend was an incredible showcase of community spirit."

He credited the work of "countless volunteers" for making the weekend a success, and singled out Cadeau, Mike and Ella Cwiertniewski, Carrie Plaskett, Tracey Hope and association president Pete Flynn "for going above and beyond in organizing the tournament."

He noted Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa, a former hockey referee, stopped by to volunteer at the barbecue.

Friesen said parent Elaina Wilkinson, whose family recently joined the Wolves organization, summed it up perfectly: "This was one of the best-run tournaments we've been to. The food court was open, there were healthy options, and everyone — from the Niagara Predators volunteers to the arena staff — pitched in to make it great."

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NOTL Wolves teams perform well in hometown tourney

Kevin MacLean
The Lake Report



U18 Wolves Goalie Corson Dick makes a sharp save against South Muskoka during third-period action. Despite his efforts, the Wolves lost 3-1. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Two Niagara-on-the-Lake rep hockey teams finished near the top of their divisions in the annual Harvest Classic tournament in Virgil last weekend.

The U13 rep Wolves went undefeated during round-robin play and made it all the way to the final, where they lost to a powerful team from Ottawa.

And the U15 Wolves had two wins and a loss in the preliminary round but made it through to the semifinals, also against a squad from Ottawa.

They lost the semi 1-0 on a late third-period goal.

Two other local teams competed in the tourney, hosted by the NOTL Hockey Association, but the U11 and U18 Wolves faced some stiff competition and didn't advance to the playoff rounds.

U13 head coach Gary Friesen praised his team's effort.

"Our team did a great job this weekend," he told The Lake Report.

"I'm incredibly proud of how we came together — playing a complete, team-first game from start to finish. It was a fun weekend of hockey and community."

The U13s opened the tournament Friday with a strong 6-1 win over Thorold, Friesen noted.

Goalie Declan MacNeil was solid between the pipes, while Jack Friesen, Ike Good and Kosta Condos each chipped in with two points to lead the offence.

On Saturday in a 3-1 win versus West Lorne, Nathan Reid, Brendan Palka and Easton Wilkinson led the way offensively, with William Ecker playing well in net.

They pulled off a 2-1 victory over Ayr in a tight contest, thanks to Good's game-winning goal with just 1:30 left on the clock.

That led to Sunday's 3-2 semifinal win over Almaguin. Jack Friesen led the offence with three assists and Campbell Whyte was the hero, burying the game-winner with 1:03 remaining.

In the U13 final, against Ottawa, also undefeated to that point, the Wolves fell 4-0. Good was the team's tournament MVP while teammates Condos and Friesen also contributed strong offensive performances.

Coach Rich Andres said his U15 Wolves are a young team that hasn't played together in past years.

But, "the boys have done a great job of learning and coming together as a team early in the season," he told The Lake Report.

Their first game was a hard-fought 2-1 win over Eganville thanks to goals by Cian Doyle and Jake VanSpronsen.

The U15s followed that with a 3-1 victory over South Kent, with goals by Logan Stewart, Doyle and VanSpronsen.

They lost their final round-robin game 2-1 to the Midwest 49ers, from the Walkerton area. Dean Olsen had NOTL's lone goal.

In the semifinal on Sunday afternoon, Ottawa, the eventual champion, skated to a 1-0 win thanks to a goal scored with under six minutes to play in the third.

Andres said goaltender Tomas Nolan was the team's tournament MVP.

"He played outstanding in every game, kept us in games even when we were outshot."

"The coaches are very proud of the boys. They battled in every game, worked hard and left everything on the ice," Andres said.